

## Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

### Chapter 15 - Muscat

**“Einar had worked with some operational commanders who’d been strict authoritarians. Soulless bastards who stuck to every minor rule and seemed to delight in ruining morale. His style of leadership was to try and run a happy team.”**

Δ

The NGO who’d loaned it to her might be in danger of losing their deposit, though Ruby was sure worse would happen to the Antonov before it went back to its owners. By taking apart the bunk beds, there was room in the compartment for a double mattress on the floor and room to work. Despite the constant rumble of the engines, Ruby had cuddled up next to Todd and sleep had come immediately. She’d been very tired and rarely had dreams about Serge.

Strange then, that her unconscious mind decided to take her back to the cellar of the house Serge once had near Marseille. A nice house, a genuine chateau in a small forest. Sadly, the chateau had been destroyed by one of their enemies. In her dream state, Ruby couldn’t recall who had destroyed the wonderful old building. Serge had kept on the move for a while, there had been many places he’d called home at one time or another. That chateau had been the only one Ruby thought of as her home too.

“Your times are terrible.” Said Serge. “I expect Spider to beat you, but Sarah....You need lots more practise and more focus.”

Serge had a training ground set up in his cellar, a full maze of various rooms. The usual shoot the bad guy before he gets you, kind of thing. Hostages to avoid shooting and various innocent bystanders, all not to be shot. Ruby’s favourite were two nuns, though she had no idea why they’d be hanging around in decidedly dodgy neighbourhoods. Serge’s killing ground was fun, they even used live rounds sometimes. There were AI enemies who fired paintballs and one or two had flailing arms, that could leave a nasty bruise. Everyone had been incredibly competitive about their scores and rankings, apart from her. Strangely, even in a dream, the cellar with its AI bad guys, looked as real as the last time she’d been there.

“Guns aren’t my thing.” She said. “Never have been, not even before I saw Jurgis killed. I have my gifts and to be honest, guns scare me.”

It wasn’t a conversation she’s ever had, though it was one she’d always wanted to have with Serge. She’d practised hard and watched recordings of Spider doing a perfect run through the maze. In the end she’d managed to get a decent score, though guns really weren’t her thing. Jurgis had been shot in the face with a noisy old Makarov pistol. The noise of the gun, the flash, the blood. When everyone in the nightclub had panicked, she’d run. No, guns were never going to be her thing.

“You need to be as good as you can, with every weapon at your disposal.” Said Serge. “You see Spider as your bodyguard, which is fine. Supposing he’s killed, or you’re on your own in the bad part of a strange town ?”

“I suppose I’d carry a gun in places I knew could be dangerous.” She said.

“You couldn’t, not with your scores. In the DGSE we’d never have let you carry a weapon. You’re quite likely to be a danger to your colleagues, rather than the bad guys.”

Her dream self was crying and bits of the conversation were sounding familiar. Serge had never been that abrupt, though he had been quite tough with her. She'd tried and improved, though she'd have struggled to pass a police firearms competence test. She still wasn't good with a gun. She still did rely on others to protect her if it became a shooting battle.

"Alright, I'll go through the rooms again, Serge." She said. "I'll keep trying until I'd be able to carry a weapon in the DGSE. You want me to be an expert with guns....Then that's what I'll become."

A bang, followed by a rumbling sound, woke her. It was the pilot's relaxed attitude to safety again, he hadn't bothered to wake everyone up as they'd approached Muscat International Airport. Todd woke up and held her, as the rumbling became louder.

"Bing bong, fasten your seatbelts." Muttered Todd. "We're about to land in Muscat."

"Yeah, I will talk to him about that." She said. "Some of our not so experienced travellers, could be having kittens about now."

Anyone who wasn't awake, had to have been dragged out of sleep, by the screech of brakes. Any tiny part of Ruby trying to cling onto sleep, was woken when the reverse thrust kicked in. No windows where they were, though Ruby's gifts picked up a large city of close to two million people.

"Actually, now I'm used to it. I quite like landing without all the kerfuffle." Said Todd.

"I can't see it ever catching on with BA."

The final screech of brakes and they were thrown together. They kissed, which wasn't a bad way to mark a safe landing. The dream came back to her, she knew it was important.

"I have a favour to ask." She said. "Not here, but I know people in Baku. I can arrange the right facilities, but I need you to teach me. I want to be good with a gun, as good as I can be. If I'm going to carry a Glock 32, I want to be an expert with it."

"Wow, that was unexpected." Said Todd. "Yeah, sure, though don't expect miracles in a couple of days. Is there any reason for this sudden conversion to being Dirty Harry?"

"You probably already think I'm crazy, so no harm in telling you. Serge came to me in a dream and told me to get better with a gun. There's was more to it, but that's the gist of it. I've learned not to ignore those kinds of dream."

"Only half crazy.....Alright, I'll be your personal weapons trainer."

The aircraft was still taxiing when kissing became touching, which became full on sex. Ruby liked it as a way to arrive in a new country and hoped they could make it a regular thing.

~ ~

Einar Gunnarsson was born in Iceland, Njardvik to be precise. A small coastal town with a population of around four and half thousand. Luckily one of that tiny population was a retired doctor, with years of experience in Sweden. An obstetrician within walking distance on a cold January night. Einar's birth had been complicated and it was unlikely he'd have lived without the retired doctor. A really cold night, it was still in the record books. His mother had nearly died too, but mother and son had lived. Einar had thrived, going on to become a soldier, before hiring himself out as a mercenary. A large heavy-set man, some went by first impressions and thought of him as a broad set of shoulders, with an empty head. Einar was no fool, he just tended to be quiet.

"I hate these islands; I trained here a few times." He said. "I don't mind the cold winters, but at this time of year they're wet and muddy. Nothing worse than trudging through miles of mud."

"I asked for a posting to Vegas." Said Lena.

A team of six, with Einar in command. He liked Lena, but the others obviously resented a mercenary heading up a Gallan operation. He'd been picked because he knew Nordland County very well, having trained there many times. They'd just spent the night in a hotel, probably their last

comfortable night before beginning surveillance operations. Sortland was the largest town in Nordland and their last chance to stock up on essentials.

"I hope Michael remembers chocolate." Said Lena. "Anything will do, but I can't go weeks without chocolate."

"You should have gone with them." He said.

"Rule one boss, always two with the vehicles."

She was smiling at him and there was a bit of a thing developing between them. Both professionals though, that kind of thing would have to wait until after the mission. Actually, Gallaan never used the word mission, their preferred term was operations and of course, operatives.

"Oh great, now it's raining." He said. "That means more mud."

"I can see them, all huddled together in the rain." Said Lena. "I hate to say it, but there's nothing covert about our operatives. They look like a paramilitary unit on a day out."

"Or a group of post grad geology students, doing local research." He said. "As a cover story, it fits our wet and often grumpy operatives, perfectly."

Lena laughed and thumped him playfully on the arm. Despite it breaking several rules and being downright stupid; he was beginning to think of moving their relationship forward, before the mission was over.

"Are you married, or.....Anything?" He asked.

She wasn't wearing a ring, but most married women in their line of work didn't. A ring was something personal, something traceable if the dung hit the air extractor.

"No to marriage and not really to the anything."

She was young, fit and attractive, of course she'd be screwing someone. Not really was code for no one she couldn't let drift if anyone better came along. Einar touched her hand and might have kissed her, if the others hadn't arrived back from doing last minute shopping. Three went in the other SUV, with a very wet Michael, climbing into the back of theirs.

"A wet goodbye to Sortland." Said Michael.

"Did you get my chocolate?"

"Yes Lena, a whole bag full. That means you get to cook breakfast for the first week."

"I don't mind."

Einar had worked with some operational commanders who'd been strict authoritarians. Soulless bastards who stuck to every minor rule and seemed to delight in ruining morale. His style of leadership was to try and run a happy team. They needed to get the job done of course, but in his experience; happy operatives were more efficient than miserable ones.

"Alright Lena, we're not far off now." He said. "You can drive us into Lekang."

"What then?" Asked Michael.

"Our orders are to carry out low profile surveillance. The island is small, but parts of it are densely wooded. Luckily, it's popular with tourists, so we won't be the only people in SUVs, trudging around with muddy boots. We trudge about and camp out at night, just like any other group of post grad geologists. We can even have the occasional barbecue."

"It's not Vegas, but it doesn't sound too bad." Said Lena.

Einar remembered the area for its natural beauty. That part of North West Norway was famous for its views of distant mountains and rugged islands. It was a pity about the freezing winters and wet summers, but they seemed to be almost a penalty for enjoying the beauty of the place. Every beautiful rose comes with thorns, as his mother would have put it.

"Have there been any strange events in the area?" Asked Michael.

Exactly what Einar had asked his controller at Gallaan and he was sure they hadn't told him everything. Low profile looking around had been his orders, reporting back anything that looked or sounded out of place. There was something going on, or he wouldn't have been hired. The amount they were paying him was suspicious too, far too much for a routing look and see job.

"A young couple disappeared a few months ago." Said Einar. "That was in the winter though. Tourists misjudging the severity of the winter isn't that uncommon. Their vehicle was never found, which is unusual. But as I said, we just trudge about and report anything that looks out of place." "So Michael, which chocolate did you buy?" Asked Lena.

~ ~

Spider, AKA Rupert Bailey, knew some reinforcements were arriving, but not their origin. They were a present from Foxy he'd heard from Ruby, though not necessarily usually employed by the British security services. Mercenaries weren't ruled out, even if Ruby had a reluctance to hire them, under normal circumstances.

"When could anything we do be described as normal circumstances?" He muttered.

"Stop talking to yourself, or you'll get locked up." Said Sarah.

He'd been watching the door to the closest bathroom, as it was also the closest shower. Just two showers for a large group of people, which was already becoming a nuisance. He was way past his usual shower time and with it being a hot climate.....He was getting fed up with his own armpit smell.

"Go and open the door a bit." He said. "The bathroom...Take a quick look. I did it about half an hour ago and Lily was in there. I don't want her thinking I'm a pervert."

"Supposing there's a man in there?" Asked Sarah.

"He won't mind, I guarantee it. It's one of those universal rule things. Men don't mind girls looking at them naked, but girls mind guys looking at them. I've no idea why, it's just one of those things."

"Women Spider, being a girl stops at about our sixteenth birthday." Said Sarah.

"Oh, please don't give me a hard time. If I accidentally see Charlie naked, she might incinerate me. I will owe you one, something huge."

"Alright, though I'm not doing this every day."

It had to be love, she hadn't taken him up on being owed a favour in return. The problem was that the door always showed the red sign for occupied and it slowly closed itself. There was banging on the door and shouting, but that gained more attention than someone giving out free beer. Sarah peeked inside and seemed to have a conversation with someone.

"It was Charlie, though she didn't seem in the mood for an incineration." Said Sarah. "Watch the door and when she's finished, she'll give you a wave."

"Thanks, I didn't want to become the group pervert." He said.

Spider was determined to sit and wait, until Charlie waved at him. Then there was talk about the new guys arriving, the reinforcements. His resolve to wait flew away, never to be seen again. Besides, it might only take a few minutes to give the new people a look over. He left Sarah, tidying some things of hers that obviously must have needed tidying. Down the exit ramp and there were three fairly old military jeeps.

"No, the vehicle section is full." Todd was telling someone. "We're not leaving our APC behind, so you can't bring the jeeps."

The Antonov had two levels. One was where they all lived and below them was the cargo deck, which doubled as a vehicle storage area. It was not only full, the APC was jammed in. It would mean a complete reorganisation and Spider knew that wasn't going to happen. Their APC was top of the

range, but the three jeeps the newbies were using, looked like they'd seen better days. To be honest, they were junk.

"We were told we could use our own transport. London promised us."

A man in an immaculate uniform, with an accent that sounded South African. If not South Africa, it was definitely from that region. He looked ready for an argument and Todd was obviously willing to give him one.

"No, it's not going to happen." Said Todd. "We've room for you and your kit. The vehicles though, will have to stay in Muscat. You could probably sell them quite easily."

That agitated the man and the people with him. Spider heard something like Arabic being spoken and Spanish, which he recognised. Quite a league of nations seemed to have arrived, all of them gradually getting angry with Todd.

"Are you offering compensation?" Shouted a woman in uniform.

Her voice had a twang to it, Spider just about recognised. Up north somewhere, the northern part of England. Too strong for Leeds, but somewhere up that way. Place in the bathroom queue forgotten, he carefully edged through the newcomers, until he was near the woman. She glared at him, which wasn't a new experience. It was the way he looked and he was used to it. Even his Sunday best smile had been known to make old ladies whimper and leave the room.

"What do you want?" The woman snapped at him.

Knowing where that accent called home mattered to him now, he had to know.

"I'm not sure about compensation." Said Todd. "I will have to check that with London."

That didn't improve the woman's temper. After muttering an obscenity in the general direction of Todd, she was glaring at him again.

"Sorry, it's your accent.....Can I ask where you're from?" He asked.

"I'm from Newcastle you bloody fool.....Where are you from?"

~ ~

Mara never liked to discuss where she was from, there'd been enough of that from the immigration people. North Africa was the most she told anyone, even good friends. She'd arrived from Algeria, when things there had been bad. Actually, things still were bad in the country of her birth. Dark hair and very thin, though she preferred the term slender, maybe svelte. How she'd been found and brought into the family of Gérard Villand was now part of Villand family folklore. There were several versions, all largely false. It had been so long ago that her memory was suspect, but he'd been the one kind face in a hostile world.

Everyone she'd met in Paris had wanted something from her. Drug dealers wanted her as a mule, while the pimps saw her as fresh meat for their brothels. In a way Villand was the same, he wanted something from her too. At least he'd been up front about it. He'd offered her a home among others in the same predicament as herself. All he'd asked was for her to do a few favours in return. That had been then and she was now seen as the number two in the Villand family. He'd already named her as the one to takeover when he was too old to carry on, or dead.

"What's wrong Aria?" She asked.

They'd just been through a routine transfer of operations from one grubby old shop to another, in another part of Paris. It was an old school way of covering your tracks, but it worked incredibly well. Villand was old school himself, having spent years at the heart of the DGSE.

"You trust my intuition; I know you do." Said Aria. "There's someone in there. Not a street person looking for somewhere to spend the night. They're looking, watching....Waiting for us."

Aria was tiny and quite young, though Villand saw potential in the girl. From somewhere in central Europe, though she never said where. That was fine, all of their family had arrived on the run from somewhere or someone. Aria had been escaping from abuse at home.

Vehicles were rotated and changed for the regular move of office. They were currently in an old Fiat van that hadn't been used in central Paris for quite some time. More old school street craft, which worked very well.

"It makes sense, we've just two more boxes to pick up." Said Mara. "Someone good will have notices there was still one last pickup to be made."

"I heard the hacker has gone missing." Said Aria. "A few are worried about how much he knew about us and our routines."

Josh the computer guy was one of those people. Always cracking silly jokes and trying to be everyone's friend. He'd become trusted, she'd even talked to him about business, sometimes business he shouldn't have known about. Now he was missing and Villand assumed he was dead. Routines and vehicles were being changed, but that took time.

"We could call for help." Said Aria. "Though....I know it's not allowed, but I have a gun."

It was breaking one of Villand's most sacred rules. Unless there was a known need for one, no one routinely carried weapons, not even a lock knife. Weapons marked you as guilty of something and brought an automatic jail term in France. Mara had a small military style blade, taped to the skin on her lower back. Nothing to do with Josh vanishing, she'd been carrying a blade since being Villand's second in command. A little personal defence had seemed prudent. A hand up the back of her blouse and she had the wicked looking blade, still in its scabbard.

"I'll swap you, Aria." She said. "Don't give me that look, I'm better than you with a firearm."

Aria wasn't happy, but they swapped weapons. Ideally, Mara would have left Aria in the van, though she knew that wasn't going to work. After losing her gun, the girl would either start a loud argument, or simply disobey her.

"I'll go first." Said Mara. "We need those boxes, they're important. But if anything happens to me, you run like the wind. Understood?"

"Yes, fine."

"Any more info from your intuition?" Asked Mara. "One man, or two men? Both of them armed to the teeth? Or are they quiche eating pacifists? Anything will help."

"Oh, how I wish it worked like that, I just get a feeling. One man, I think. Nervous and hiding. He probably wants to follow us to the new place. I'm not totally sure though, I'm never totally sure."

"Alright, we'll get the boxes and see what happens." Said Mara.

A really crap plan, but it was the best she could think of. One nervous guy didn't sound that bad. Given the opportunity, they might be able to take him prisoner. It was very dark out in a bad part of town.

"No rush.....We stroll inside, as though we haven't a care in the world." Said Mara.

"Have you ever.....Have you shot anyone?" Asked Aria.

"Yes, twice, but there was no choice."

"Did they die?"

"One of them did."

That actually seemed to cheer the girl up, which Mara could understand. Gun down the back of her jeans, exactly the way to accidentally give herself a second backside. It was awkward though. It was a large gun and shoved anywhere else, it would leave an obvious bulge in her clothing. No more idle chatter, as they opened the shop doorway and went inside.

"There they are, the two final boxes to move." Said Mara.

The shop had sold pet food for a few years, before closing down. There were still two sacks of rabbit food in a back room. With decay and the efforts of vermin, the smell of that rabbit mix, permeated the entire building. Not a bad smell, unless you were there for several hours per day, for a few weeks. Mara had begun to feel a real hatred for rabbits.

"Oh, this one is heavy." Said Aria.

Everything went nasty in a hurry. Aria used her phone as a flashlight, which was what they always did. It caught the man's face, who wasn't doing a brilliant job of hiding. Mara had the gun out fast, aiming it at his face. Of course, Aria went for the knife in her pocket and the backroom of the pet food store, became as dark as night. Mara was a regular swimmer, she had good upper body strength for a slender person. Her left hand went forward and found a shirt to grab.

"Keep still, or I will fucking shoot you." She yelled.

"Don't be stupid, I'm a cop."

"He's not." Said Aria.

The man grabbed her hand and twisted, pulling himself free of her grasp. In those sorts of situations, it's often a case of reflexes taking over. Mara might have only shot two people, but she'd been in quite a few street fights. He was stronger than her and he knew it. He was no longer pulling away, but coming at her. His right hand had a good strong hold on the collar of her jacket.

"Don't be an idiot.....Shoot a cop and they'll lock you up forever."

"He's not a cop." Shouted Aria.

She was really going to do it, risk her entire future on the word of a skinny girl and her intuition. He was close to her, very close. Mara thrust the gun forward until it connected with something and fired, just the once. A single shot can be ignored as a backfire. Two or more shots and someone might call the cops. No matter what, there was always the time it took for mindless bureaucracy to do its thing. It was a shit part of town; the cops were unlikely to arrive in less than fifteen minutes.

"Christ Mara.....You shot him." Said Aria.

Never use names, never, ever use names at those kinds of moments. Aria had been with them long enough to know that, though Mara was sure no harm had been done. Her bullet had hit flesh and the man had gone down. There was still a gurgling sound, which meant her bullet had probably hit him in the throat.

"Calm down....Are you alright?" Mara asked.

"Yes.....I've never.....Shit, you actually shot him."

"Grab one of the boxes and put it in the van." Said Mara. "Stay in the van and don't come back. I'll tidy up in here."

"Alright."

The gurgling had stopped by the time Mara was down on her knees, her phone's light aimed at the man's face. There was a lot of blood, the bullet had gone right through his neck. There was also a lot of red froth, some of it still bubbling a little. For one dreadful moment, she was sure his eyes had moved in her direction. Bodies can do strange things though, she knew that. Villand had a story about a cop taking three bullets in the chest, but still jumping up out of a chair. Yep, bodies did some weird stuff, even dead bodies.

"Let's have a look in your pockets." She muttered.

Nothing, she hadn't expected there would be. She had all the ID she needed; she had his face. Mara aimed her phone and took a picture. An awful image, with a lot of his throat in view. She could

hardly send that to her contact in the Paris police. A contact with access to the Europol database. With luck Mara would have a name to go with that face, before breakfast.

"Alright....Let's get a picture your grandma wouldn't mind having on the mantelpiece."

The second picture was perfect, he might have been lying on the sofa, watching TV. Mara sent the picture to her contact, with a copy to Villand. That just left the second box to carry outside and there'd be no trace of the family ever being in the closed down pet food store. She found Aria stood beside their van.

"It's done, we can go now." Said Mara.

"You're three for two now.....Three shot and two dead."

"Are you alright ?" Asked Mara.

Tempting to hug the girl, but that wasn't always welcome. Aria had suffered abuse in her family home and there were rumours that it had gone on for years.

"I'm fine." Said Aria.

"I know it's late, but if you don't have plans. I'm going to get a takeaway, probably Chinese food. You're welcome to join me, if you like ? You can even have the sofa, if you don't fancy going out again."

"Yes, that sounds nice." Said Aria.

~ ~

It was a bit like travelling with a major airline, waiting for baggage to catch up with you and long waits for connections. Small items could arrive near Sophie while she slept, via Nazili's wonderful wormhole device. Ruby called it that, though he'd told Sophie that was a bad description. They'd been on the move though and there were easier and more conventional ways to receive large crates of supplies. The boxes were coming via a well-known carrier, on a cargo plane due to land in Muscat the following day. Local customs and immigration had been briefed and no one from their department would be so much as looking directly at the crates, much less opening them. All arranged by Foxy of course and a little bribery at a local level.

"Know the right people and you really could send an artillery piece by air. Though you'd need to dismantle it a little."

Spider had said, once she'd shown him the list of what was due to arrive. Spider had to know of course. Despite Todd being there, she still thought of Spider as her go to guy when it came to anything that goes bang or boom. She had extra firepower on the way and the manpower to use it. Not that her wunderkinds needed advanced weaponry....They were advanced weaponry.

Quite a lot to do, but Ruby had given herself an hour or so of what she considered to be, well earned rest and recuperation. She was sat in a deck chair, using the Antonov's portside wing as a sunshade. Todd was sat next to her and they were both watching the new arrivals getting their kit ready.

"You were right not to agree to their demand for compensation." Said Todd. "They were just trying to rip you off. Those old jeeps of theirs are antiques, total junkers."

"I needed to make a point, they do have a reputation for trying it on, as Spider would put it. If they do a good job for us, I may well buy them three new vehicles. Not that they need to know that, not yet."

"If any of them survive." Said Todd. "I'm sure Foxy only sent the Sardaukar, because they're deniable and expendable."

"A bit like us then." Said Ruby. "You know about them; do they have a proper name ?"

"Not really, though I saw them called McGill's Marauders on a report from MI5. Then McGill got himself shot, so I have no idea who's their commander these days."



A pigeon flew overhead and then stopped directly over the new arrivals. Wings stationary, it hovered in exactly the way pigeons tend not to.

“Did you see that.....The pigeon ?” Asked Todd. “I’d bet anything that’s something to do with Sophie.”

“Sophie is involved, but it was Nari’s idea. We can’t use drones to look for bad guys, this is an international airport. Nari had the idea of fixing cameras to the back of pigeons. Then Sophie had the idea of helping the pigeons fly better, by using her gifts. She’s basically shoving them across the sky, but I wasn’t in the mood to make a huge thing about it. The images are great by the way, better than our drones could get.”

“Well, if it works.....Seems a bit rough on the poor pigeons.” Said Todd.

“Nari assures me that once the cameras come off, our super pigeons will be fine. They’ll go back to doing what happy little pigeons normally do.”

“The Sardaukar will spot them spying on them.” Said Todd. “They’re not fools.”

An area of the plane had been assigned to them, an area no more or less comfortable than any other part. The refusal to take their aged vehicles with them had obviously caused resentment. Their reinforcements were currently creating their own camp, about twenty feet to the rear of the Antonov.

“Come on, we should go and talk to McGill’s whatever they are.” Said Ruby. “We can’t let them have their own camp. Like it or not, they have to be part of the team.”

“Can I go and get my gun ?” Asked Todd.

“Not funny, not even slightly.”

A group of mercenaries with no allegiance to anyone. They were ideal for the kind of mission Ruby usually got involved in. What Todd referred to as the Sardaukar would gladly work for anyone. The main thing was keeping them under control and obeying orders. She could easily put the whammy on them, but that was far from ideal. They needed to react fast in battle, not like zombies. Ruby wandered over to their makeshift camp, with Todd following her. She stopped next to their fire, where one of them was frying something in a skillet.

“I’m Ruby, we never were properly introduced. Sorry about your vehicles, but there isn’t room for them.”

“Compensation would have been nice.”

“You might have got that, if you hadn’t tried to rip me off.” Said Ruby.

Ruby let her mind take every thought around the fire into her mind, at a very shallow level. Half an hour and she’d know names, where they were born, even their favourite cookies. Find an excuse to be among them for an hour and she’d know how each of them had lost their cherry. Unfair and horribly intrusive, but there was a war to be fought. She needed to know their strengths and weakness and she needed the information in a hurry.

“You can’t live out here.” Said Todd. “This is an airport, they have rules.”

Spider thought a few of them were quite friendly, especially a woman from Newcastle. Spider probably hadn’t told them to take their camp apart and live in the cargo hold of an Antonov.

“Who is your commander ?” Asked Ruby. “I heard the name McGill, but I’m told he was killed in action.”

“I’m McGill..... Jeff, who was the CO, was my brother.”

Tall and dark, the man standing up to talk was the one who’d made the most noise about having to get rid of their rather elderly jeeps. No hand offered to shake, he just looked at her, though it was more like a mild glare.

“The fact is you can’t camp here.” Said Ruby. “This is an international airport and the goodwill towards us will only stretch so far. You have to move inside the aircraft.”

“It’s actually quite comfortable, once you get used to it.” Said Todd.

“I was told to report to a Mr R Mason.” Said McGill.

There was a lot of hostility around her, which wasn’t all bad news. Angry people are careless not only with words, but with their thoughts. A few minutes of angry and disorganised thinking would tell her more than a couple of hours of calm. She’d have a headache afterwards of course, a really bad one.

“You’re reporting to me.” She said. “I am Ruby Mason, Ruby Anne Mason to be precise.”

“I report to you.....You’re kidding.” Said McGill.

“No, I’m not joking. Move onto the plane and obey orders, or leave....No payment, just leave.”

“But Alex has just told our vehicles.”

“Not my problem.” Said Ruby.

McGill stopped glaring and grinned at her.

“Is the old Antonov really comfortable ?” He asked.

“Yes, once you get used to it.” Said Ruby.

“Alright ladies and gentleman, you heard the lady.” Yelled McGill. “We’re moving into the Hotel Antonov.”

~

~

© Ed Cowling ~ October 2022